



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release DECEMBER 4, 1955

CEILOMETER PROBLEM ATTACKED

Safer passage for the songbird migrating south is assured for next fall, thanks to the cooperation of the Air Force, the Weather Bureau and numerous groups interested in the welfare of birdlife, Secretary of the Interior Douglas McKay said today.

Secretary McKay declared that the high mortality rate of migratory birds in the vicinity of airports where high powered vertical light beams are used to determine the ceiling will be appreciably lowered during the 1956 flights but that the problem of mortality of birds around high buildings and high towers still thwarts solution.

"The toll at ceilometer stations in recent years has been alarming", the Secretary said. "As many as 25,000 birds have perished in a single night at a single airfield. Most of the trouble has been in the South but reports of bird losses have come from as far north as New York and Pennsylvania. But with all of us working together we think we have the big problem around ceilometer stations pretty well licked."

The ceilometer is a vertical beam of light of several million candlepower which is used in determining the ceiling at an airport. Just what effect the light of the ceilometer has upon the birds in flight is not known. But the bleak evidence is that a combination of a cold front, a low ceiling and a ceilometer results in the death of thousands of song and insectivorous birds.

It is presumed that the birds are temporarily blinded by the light or that their sense of direction is blunted in some way. The effect is that the birds crash into the ground and are killed while going at a high rate of speed. For some unknown reason bird losses occur only in the fall on southward flights.

Filters have been developed which retain the visible light and permit only ultraviolet or "black light" to go upward for ceiling measurement. The black light has no effect upon the migrating birds. Two of these filters have been installed on Weather Bureau ceilometers in Knoxville and Nashville, Tennessee, with good results. Bird lovers are making plans for obtaining more filters for other Weather Bureau stations.

The Department of the Interior and the Air Force have discussed the advisability of the use of filters on Air Force ceilometers next fall when the birds are in flight and the indications are that this will be done. The Weather Bureau has instructed its personnel at ceilometer stations to turn off unfiltered beams when birds are in flight provided that this can be done without endangering air travel.

A wide variety of birds have fallen victim to the ceilometer beam but for the most part warblers and tanagers predominate.

Most migratory birds are protected by Federal law and come under the jurisdiction of the Fish and Wildlife Service.